Remembering Mr. Shawn's
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A STORY IN THE NEW YORKER

WHEN I WAS THINKING OF SETTLING IN INDIA AFTER graduating from Oxford—by then I'd been away in the West for ten years—I had written to Norman Cousins, the editor of *The Saturday Review*, who was a friend of my father's, for his advice on how to go about it. He had written back:

4 September 1959

Dear Ved:

You want to know what the best way is of finding your way back to India. I should have supposed that the question should go the other

way around. You will have no trouble in metabolizing your way into your homeland. Your country, on the other hand, may have some trouble in getting to know the new man that is you and giving you a place commensurate with your stature and capabilities. . . .

You are only now at the beginning. You have the responsibility, therefore, to do those things that will best contribute to your own continued development. In doing this, you also serve your country and, in a more basic sense, the cause of people everywhere who want to believe in the limitless possibilities of the human mixture.

Norman could be embarrassingly extravagant—even rhapsodic—in his enthusiasms, and this particular enthusiasm of his had the effect of making me feel uneasy. At Oxford, I'd become so sensitive to people's style that I was put off by his writing; many of the observations in his letter struck me as well-meaning rather than accurate. Still, my father, who had met him about a decade earlier, when Norman spent some time in New Delhi interviewing Prime Minister Nehru for his book "Talks with Nehru," set great store by his opinion, and I—in part, no doubt, because I had become blind shortly before I reached the age of four—set great store by my father's opinion. Moreover, Norman had written a high-flown, emotional review of my young autobiography, "Face to Face," which I'd finished just before going up to Balliol College, Oxford, as a freshman, three years earlier, at the age of twenty-two, and he had also put a drawing of me on the cover of his magazine. Although I was touched by that generous gesture, I felt that I could never measure up to his grandiose expectations of me. Yet my father, perhaps because of his upbringing in British India, seemed to think that doing well in life often depended on having friends in high places. As children, my brothers and sisters and I had all rebelled against this view of the world and had wanted to make our own way. Still, in some corner of my mind, without knowing it, I must have grown up to be my father's son.

I had just spent two turbulent months in India—months that led me to postpone the decision of where I should live—and now I was on a plane taking me to New York so I could go to Harvard, where I had a prize fellowship to do a Ph.D. in history. I suddenly remembered Norman, and felt the need to explain to him and to others how India had affected me and why I had chosen to postpone my decision about settling there. In fact, I suddenly felt the need to write a sort of postscript to "Face to Face," to bring it up to date.

The plane made a stop at London's Heathrow Airport, and I called Kingsley Martin, the longtime editor of the British weekly *The New Statesman and Nation,* and asked if he would be interested in my Indian article. I had come to know Kingsley, a man of shrewd, independent judgment, through "Face to Face." After it was published in England, he had written to me, "I have been reading your book over the week-end with very great pleasure. It is a book to keep and reread." Some time later, I had sent him a little article I'd written about my experiences at Oxford. He had rejected it, but with a very pleasant letter, saying, "My guess is that the time has come for you to work very hard on improving your writing. Not that it is bad in any way, but that you might be able to make it far better with pruning, compressing, and sharpening. However, we will talk about this when we meet." During my Oxford years, we became fast friends, and later he put me up for his club, the Savile.

Now, when I got him on the telephone from the airport, he said, "We could always use a political article on India by you. But the article you have in mind sounds personal and impressionistic. That would not be suitable for our readers. What about trying your idea on David Astor?"

I felt nervous about ringing Astor, the editor of the London *Observer.* Although I had several friends on the paper and had visited its offices, I knew Astor only by his reputation, and some of my reporter friends referred to him as God. In any event, I didn't

think that my writing was up to his paper's standard. I was so much in awe of the *Observer* (as it then was) that whenever I could I read practically every word of it—even Katharine Whitehorn's column for women, on, say, "Tips to Mothers," for the sheer pleasure of her style. The paper had taught me a lot about England and the world, about the revolutions taking place in theatre and music in the late fifties, and about letters and politics generally. But now I decided that I would try Astor. His paper had published an extremely favorable review of "Face to Face." Moreover, he was a Balliol man and was known to be hospitable to people from his college.

I got Astor on the line just as my flight was called. He's going to ask me to describe my idea for the article in two minutes, and I will be unhinged, I thought. Instead, he asked, "How long will your screed be?" His manner, at once grand and pointed, took me aback. Reaching for a figure out of thin air, I said, "Oh, thirteen thousand words."

"The most we could do would be fifteen hundred," he said. "The American magazines like long, boring things. You might try one of them."

Back on the plane, I told myself that since his paper ran to only fourteen pages he couldn't possibly use the kind of long article I had in mind. Still, his response, together with Kingsley's, left me feeling limp and discouraged.

Almost as soon as I got to Harvard, I started making trips to New York and peddling the idea of the postscript to various newspapers and magazines. I had no trouble seeing editors. Some of them lorded it over me; Philip Horton, the executive editor of *The Reporter,* for instance, asked me how I thought I could aspire to appear in the company of luminaries like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who regularly graced its pages. Others—among them Carmel Snow, the chairman (as she was then called) of the editorial board of *Harper's Bazaar;* Irita Van Doren, the editor of the New York *Herald Tribune Book Review;* and John Fischer, the

editor of *Harper's Magazine*—took me to lunch at expensive restaurants, like Château Henri IV, and listened to me with half an ear. A mere mention of the idea of a postscript, however, seemed to cast a pall over our meetings. After all, I was reminded, the book had been out for more than two years. If there was some additional material, it surely belonged in a new edition. Anyway, a magazine should not be expected to publish what seemed like an appendix to a book. For my part, I wondered how writers survived on nothing but lunches. I wished I could tell the basically discouraging, if hospitable, editors what I thought of them; but that, I felt, was a luxury granted only to those with private means and no fear of consequences. My series of dead-end conversations with editors should have made it clear to me that there was something wrong with my idea, but I kept pressing on, as if dogged determination were all I needed in order to succeed.

Stopping in at Norman Cousins's office, I brought up the subject of the postscript with him.

"Did you suggest it to Ted Weeks?" he asked. Aside from Norman himself, Edward A. Weeks, the editor of The *Atlantic Monthly* Press, who had edited and published "Face to Face," was my only real friend in the American writing establishment. The two men had so little in common that it was hard to think of them as working in the same field. Weeks was sedate and literary, his talk full of contemporary writers like Hemingway and of country pursuits like fishing. Norman was brisk and political, and what he enjoyed most was talking about world statesmen and big causes. In a voice that was as warm and rough as his handshake, Norman added, "I'm sure Ted would jump at the idea."

"Weeks was the first of many editors to whom I've mentioned the idea, but he, like all the others, wants something short," I said. "He has all the good will in the world, but he's hemmed in by the constraints of space in his magazine."

As we talked, Norman kept jumping up and taking from a bookshelf one or another of a group of primitive African artifacts

he had collected on his travels, and handing it to me, then waiting expectantly to see whether I could tell what it was and perhaps whether I could admire it with my fingers as he did with his eyes. It seemed like a second- or third-grade test at a school for the blind. Even as I correctly identified the artifacts, I squirmed, feeling guilty at not being able to live up to his kind, outgoing nature.

"What's this?"

"A giraffe."

"Why don't you do a thousand-word teaser for the *S.R.*?" he suggested. *Atlantic* articles finished just as one got really interested, but the ones in *The Saturday Review*—or *S.R.*, as he called his magazine—were like little introductions to articles that might be written for *The Atlantic* one day.

"I couldn't possibly," I said. "There is too much to say. But thank you all the same."

"And this?"

"A zebra."

"How many words would it take, then?"

"About thirteen thousand words, I think."

"This?"

"A rhinoceros."

"I know what," he said abruptly. He opened his office door, stepped out, said something to his secretary, and came back in, almost in one swoop. He was restless and fast-moving, and seemed to be happiest when he was doing something active.

Soon he was describing me and my project in lavish terms to someone on the phone, as if I were not in the room.

At one point, I tried to step out, but he handed me the telephone, saying, "Talk to William Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker*."

I had not heard of Mr. Shawn and was scarcely familiar with the magazine. But I was aware of its great reputation and its mystique—qualities that made me think it would be the last place to

welcome a personal article by a struggling twenty-five-year-old graduate student. Yet I recalled that the magazine had published a brief review of my book and, in it, had described my character in one unsettling word, which when I read it gave me a shock of recognition. The word was "truculence."

I now found myself speaking to a person whose voice was hard to make out. At first, I thought this person must be a very youthful man who worked for William Shawn. In my Oxford setting, voices had tended to be forceful. This one was quiet and gentle, and even seemed on the verge of a quaver, although it hardly ever actually quavered. It was very clear and friendly. Above all, it had not a hint of the self-importance or condescension I had come to associate with editors. But I soon found out that I was indeed speaking with William Shawn.

"How long are you going to be in New York?" he asked.

"Only a day or two," I said. Actually, I had planned to return to Harvard that evening and had made no provision for an overnight stay, and I had no money.

"Would it be convenient for you to drop by today for a cup of tea?"

I remember thinking how ironic it was that the editor of such a supposedly sophisticated magazine should sound natural. I was bowled over. "Yes, please," I said eagerly.

"What time would suit you?" he asked.

"What time would suit *you*?" I asked.

He was reluctant to propose a time, and, although normally I would have taken the initiative, his courtesy was so disarming that I couldn't find my tongue. It took some negotiating in the manner of "After you" before we settled upon four o'clock.